

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Psalm 22, Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9, John 18:1-19:42

INTRO

“...they pierce my hands and feet.” —Psalm 22:16

Welcome, and thank you again for taking the time to listen to this message for today, Good Friday. Today is the centre-point of Christianity — it’s an unpleasant day — the events of Good Friday are horrendous, they are bloody, they are disturbing. But we ought to spend some time in this troubling place.

I once heard a pastor say, “We can’t pole vault over Good Friday to Easter Sunday.” And that’s an important word for us, because the temptation is certainly there. Jesus’ crucifixion is deeply disturbing, & we might think, “Why would anyone choose to be so morbid as to tell this story? Couldn’t we just breeze past it & get to Easter? It’s so much happier!” But we ought not pole vault over Good Friday, because it’s the crucifixion that is the centre of our faith. Paul, writing to the Corinthian church wrote,

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” —1 Corinthians 2:2

Nothing! He wanted to know nothing else but Jesus & Jesus’ crucifixion. So the warning for us is that if we get into the habit of skipping over Good Friday to stories that are happier, we’ll miss the point entirely.

The story of Jesus is not mere sentimentality, providing for us a shallow sense of comfort or coziness — it’s not escapist. It gets into the guts of life, it deals with the ugliness of our sinful reality, with all of the pain & hopelessness & despair & doubt that we feel & know. And that’s why the biblical story is so important — it’s not sentimental escapism. When we find ourselves in the deepest abyss, we also find Jesus with us — he has descended to those depths too. Reading the lessons for today is proof of that — of the depths to which Jesus descended, of the pain he knew, of the agony he endured. And this is how the Gospel has something to say to the world — has something to say to you and me. There’s a comfort here because in our own pain & agony we are told that we are not alone, and that Jesus has in fact (as we’ll

discover in this story) redeemed us from the curse of the fall — from the brokenness of our sin — from the effects of this disease that has infected each and every one of us. It's not a fairy tale, but is terribly earthly, terribly real.

So, once again, as we begin I'll invite you to pause this recording and to take some time to read the lessons for today, all of which are chosen for their description of, or allusion to the crucifixion of Jesus and the implications of this event for us. They are first Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (one of the most familiar passages of Isaiah), then Psalm 22 (which Jesus quotes when he's hanging on the cross), Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9, and finally the Gospel text: John 18:1-19:42 (this is two whole chapters of John, recounting the story of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion).

GIVING BLOOD

A couple of weeks ago there was a radio program in the States that aired the story of a 92 year old woman named Lilian Bloodworth. When she was a little kid Lilian got pneumonia and she has a memory of lying in the hospital bed with her brother in the bed next to her brother who was giving her a blood transfusion with his own blood, & which helped her to survive her pneumonia. Years later, as a mother Lilian's own son needed a transfusion, which he too received, and lived.

These two experiences solidified Lilian's resolve to give blood every at every possible opportunity. She explains in the program that throughout her life, every 56 days, as soon as she's eligible to donate, she does so, & not a day later. And every time she goes in to give blood, people think it's a joke — "Come on, is your name really Mrs. Bloodworth?" You can't make this stuff up — her name really is Lilian Bloodworth!

At 92 years, she's been told now that she needs her blood more than other people do, and so she's been forced to retire from donating — but she's given over 23 gallons of blood over her lifetime. I know many in our congregation give blood regularly — we should do a tally one day to see who's given the most, and if it's at all close to Lilian Bloodworth's 23 gallons.

This is the day in which Jesus pours out his own blood for the lives of others — as a sacrifice for you and me, and for all of humanity

FORSAKEN

I'm struck by Jesus' haunting cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Somehow, in this moment, Jesus felt that he had been abandoned. For the first time in his human life — for the first time in his divine being, he knew separation from the Father. Episcopal priest & author Fleming Rutledge writes,

"Hell is the absence of hope, the absence of love, the absence of light, the absence of God. On the cross, Jesus experienced the absence of God and, steering toward the pain, descended into that hell—experiencing the absolute worst." —Fleming Rutledge, *Three Hours*, 48.

That was the level of his involvement in humanity — that he took this on himself. Just as we in our own ways experience separation from God, so too did Jesus.

There's a common plot device in storytelling known as *Deus ex machina* — "God from the machine." It's an unexpected and sudden deliverance in an otherwise hopeless situation — a character who descends suddenly onto the scene & saves the day. There's a good example of this in the show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. If you're a Trekkie, or you've watched *Star Trek*, you might know the character Wesley Crusher — the son of Doctor Crusher on the ship.

Wesley's character was so brilliant & intelligent that after entire episodes of the *Enterprise* being in harrowing & unescapable danger, Wesley would swoop in and in the last 3 minutes of the episode quickly solve the problem, saving the lives of every crew member on board. It was ridiculous how often the show turned to this plot line — the boy who seemingly effortlessly saves the other characters.

Deus ex machina doesn't happen in Jesus' death. There's no easy escape — no angels flying down & flattening the Roman soldiers, not even the hand of God himself moves to save his son when Jesus is crying out to God. Jesus lowers himself to the lowest possible point, torture & public exposure reserved for the lowest of people, and he walks into this, and he isn't rescued at the last possible moment. We know that resurrection is coming, but it isn't coming yet. Good Friday is a day in which we give space for our unanswered prayers, as we hear the mystery of Jesus' own unanswered prayer. Have you ever felt forsaken by God?

FINISHED

Paul writes,

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” —2 Corinthians 5:21

Jesus endured all of this — the forsakenness of God — so that he could take on the sin of all humanity & die as a perfect sacrificial lamb on our behalf. And doing so, he completed his work. “It is finished” he said. It is on the cross that the work of Jesus is carried through to its completion.

The crucifixion isn’t just preparation for the resurrection — a necessary step on our way to happier times — it’s *the* event through which Jesus’ work is carried out. And the resurrection, then, is the vindication of Jesus the crucified One. It’s the proof that the spilled blood of Jesus really did accomplish it’s work:

“Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” —Hebrews 10:19-23

Jesus’ death paves the way so that we might have full forgiveness & full access to God — that we might live in peace before God, and knowing him & his love for us — that we can with confidence approach God, knowing that he really does hear our prayers, even when it feels like we’ve been forsaken. Because on the cross Jesus was forsaken so that we won’t have to be

He poured out his blood for us. He didn’t retire at age 92 like Lilian Bloodworth. He didn’t quit when things got dangerous or risky for himself. He didn’t live a good life for a lot of years simply to be a good example for us. He poured out his blood in painful, agonizing sacrifice for us — sinners in need of redemption. A redemption that was won today — on *Good* Friday.

Amen.